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WHAT DOES IT MEAN
TO SERVE GOD?

Andrew Koh

There is no lack of opportunities to serve God in the church. One can sing in the choir, participate in evangelism, set up the audio and visual system, help to prepare refreshments, and the list goes on ...

Unfortunately, some will not avail themselves to serve God in the church at all. They are cold in their attitude towards doing anything in the church. They tend to hold back and keep themselves away from service. Their time in the church ends when the church worship ends. They disappear once the closing prayer is over and would not stay a minute longer. Another group of churchgoers, though involved in the church activities, have set a limit as to how far they will go in serving God. If more is required of them in terms of effort or time, they will decline and leave the work to others. To them, serving God must be according to their own liking and convenience; they think that they are doing God a favour when they labour in certain areas of service. There are yet others who may come across as fervent and active, spending a lot of time and giving attention to various affairs in the church. Nevertheless, Jesus will say of some among this latter group: “Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matthew 7:22-23). This shows that God will not necessarily accept any labour rendered to Him.

Why this incongruous spectrum of attitudes towards serving God? One main reason is the lack of a biblical understanding among many churchgoers of what serving God means. This lack is evidenced by

many church members neglecting to serve God or not serving Him on His terms.

What Neglect of Service Means

In 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, the apostle Paul portrays the church as the body of Christ. According to God’s purpose, the members in a church should function in a corporate manner. The Holy Spirit is the One who has given the church a diversity of spiritual gifts. He has endowed every member of the church with spiritual gifts, “dividing to every man severally as he will” (v. 11b). In different areas of service in the church, the gifts from the Holy Spirit can be put to good use for the benefit of the church. Be it singing in the choir, evangelising, preaching, teaching, etc., all these are areas in which church members can exercise their God-given gifts for the edification of the saints unto the glory of God. Thus, when church members do not fulfil their roles in a local church, it causes the church to be dysfunctional.

Paul must have had this concern in mind when he likens the members of the church to the different parts of a human body (ear, eye, nose, foot, etc.). The hand is dependent on the foot, and the eye cannot do without the ear (vv. 15-16). God has “set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him” (v. 18). Despite the diversity of gifts, Paul emphasises that all the members of the church belong to one body (vv. 20, 27). Like the different parts of a human body that work together by fulfilling their respective functions, church members must work together with one another by fulfilling their God-given roles. Failure to do so will result in the church’s inability to fulfil its function according to God’s plan. A dysfunctional local church is like a man with certain parts of his body not functioning as they should.

What Being a Servant Means

How does God want Christians to serve Him? How does the Bible describe God's relationship with His people in terms of service? In the Bible, there are many descriptions of the multi-faceted relationship between God and His people – father and son, shepherd and sheep, vine and branches, etc. – which all have their own emphasis and significance. When it comes to service, one particular relationship stands out: the “master and servant” relationship.

The New Testament Greek word for “slave” (*doulos*) is translated about 127 times as “servant(s)” in the King James Bible. It actually means a bond-slave. Unquestionably, Christians in the first century were very clear of their identity – to be a Christian was to be a slave of Christ. As a bond-slave to Christ, a Christian was no more under the tyrannies of sin, falsehood, the world and Satan, for he had a new Master in Christ.

Now, the word “slave” comes from the root verb meaning “to bind” or “to tie together”. To tie with a bond means that two parties at both ends of the bond are attached to each other. It signifies a relationship between two parties linked by this bond. To be a slave of Jesus Christ means to serve Him because of his new bond with Him. Christians must have no other basis for their service than the bond they now have with Christ, their Master.

Sadly, the situation is very different today. The word “Christian” connotes different ideas to different people. Many people transport their own misguided ideas into the Christian identity. One main reason why many Christians today have wrong concepts towards service is

that they fail to realise their identity: they are actually slaves to the Lord Jesus Christ!

What This Relationship of Servanthood Entails

Having established our identity as slaves to Christ, what does the Bible say with regard to this relationship?

God's Exclusive Ownership

Many Christians today are not conscious of who owns them; they think they are the masters of their lives. They fail to realise that they were once under the absolute control of sin and could not wrest themselves away from the influence of sin's dominion. This was a very miserable state we were once in, which the Bible describes as being “dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). We were without God, alienated and in utter spiritual darkness!

Interestingly, the Bible uses the picture of God's deliverance of His people out of slavery in Egypt to denote His rightful ownership of His people. “For unto me the children of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 25:55). Like the children of Israel who were no longer under bondage in Egypt, Christians are no longer under the bondage of sin but have a new Master in God who says to them, “I am the LORD your God.” Having left his “old master”, a Christian is “made free from sin” and has become “the servants of righteousness” (Romans 6:18). A Christian is no longer under the dominion of sin. He is set at liberty to resist sin by the grace of God. In other words, he is set free from sin and has yielded himself to obey the preaching and teaching of the Word of God, having “obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you”

(Romans 6:17). It is as if he has a new name, new language, new beginning and new identity with respect to Christ as his Master. A stupendous transformation has occurred when a person is saved!

A failure to fully apprehend this astounding transformation from being a slave of sin to a slave of righteousness will result in a lackadaisical attitude towards service. When we truly understand the depth of the misery of our bondage to sin, we will be utterly grateful to God for rescuing us out of that miserable state and claiming us as His completely! Christians who have truly understood the exclusive ownership of Christ over them will have no problem acknowledging that they are not their own, and will thereby yield themselves totally to serve Him.

Our Singular Devotion

The proper response to God's exclusive ownership of us is that we be singularly devoted to Him. We do not live for self or anyone else in this world, but solely for God. Christians are to be in the world, but "not of the world" (John 17:16). Admittedly, being in the world, we are susceptible to powerful and persuasive distractions that may steer us away from our singular devotion to God.

Now, we must not underestimate the distractions that may come our way. They may come from people familiar to us or whom we trust, even "(arising) among you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams" (Deuteronomy 13:1a). What such a "prophet" or "dreamer" conveys or advocates may seem authoritative, logical and even spectacular; but if it has the effect of veering us away from our singular devotion to God, it should straightaway ring alarm bells in our minds. The guiding

principle is to beware of people who would teach us to "go after other gods, which (we have) not known, and (make) us serve them" (Deuteronomy 13:2b).

Having said that, Christians must understand that the reason why these distractions are allowed by God to come into their lives is to "prove" or test them (cf. Deuteronomy 13:3); i.e. through the distractions, God examines their hearts. The design of these testings is to lay open what was previously concealed. Essentially, these testings (from distractions) that Christians go through are to show whether they love God's Word or not, given that God will never command Christians to do something that is contrary to His will, which is clearly laid out in His Word. The basis of all service unto God must be out of love. The people of the world may serve their master out of necessity, but this is not how Christians serve their Master. If you have truly loved the Lord in the first place, then even in the face of such testings to distract you from serving God, you will still "walk after the LORD your God, and fear him, and keep his commandments, and obey his voice, and ye shall serve him, and cleave unto him" (Deuteronomy 13:4). A Christian's singular devotion to God will cause him to remain steadfast in his service during times of testings. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast (read 'singularly devoted'), unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Our Unconditional Service

How far should Christians go in serving God? Should Christians set any limit at all in their service to God? The answer is obvious. Having been saved from the

misery of sin, Christians now belong exclusively to God; they cannot live for themselves but their entire lives must be rendered to God in service. They are to serve God not according to their specifications, but on God's terms. They must not give room for any distractions that will hinder their service, as demonstrated by Jesus in John 12 when a group of Greeks sought to see Him.

It was at a time very near Jesus' last Passover in Jerusalem before His crucifixion. Jesus "knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father" (John 13:1a). Many people had arrived in Jerusalem because they heard that Jesus was going to Jerusalem (John 12:12). Among the multitude, a group of Greeks sought an audience with Jesus. Though the Greeks had approached Philip and Andrew who straightaway told Jesus about it, Jesus did not give an answer to Philip and Andrew directly but instead spoke of His imminent death, which thereafter will "draw all men" unto Him (John 12:32). Jesus steadfastly focused His ministry mainly towards the house of Israel and not to the Gentiles during His first coming. He did not let the Greeks distract Him from His main focus. Only after His death, resurrection and ascension would God "draw all men" (Gentiles included) through the apostles (cf. Acts 1:8).

Clearly, Jesus has set for us the standard of serving God. His unswerving service to

God the Father culminated even unto His death. Fittingly, Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (John 12:24). He used an analogy of the "corn of wheat" that must "die" in the earth in order for its seeds to germinate and later bring forth much "fruit" of harvest to make a comparison with His death that would bring forth the "fruit" of salvation for many. Similarly, Jesus' obedience in service unto death for the salvation of mankind is to be the pattern for Christians to follow in serving Him. Jesus said, "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me" (John 12:25-26a). Christians are to disregard even their lives in serving God. Christ has given His all for us, even His life on the cross – should we in return set a limit or even a condition in serving Him? God forbid! A true child of God would do anything for Him if he is ready to die for Christ.

Conclusion

Let us therefore lay aside all hindrances and put on the mindset of a servant when we serve God, like how the Lord Jesus "made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and ... humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:7-8).

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